CHAPTER FOUR

“IS CHRIST DIVIDED?”
AN ANALYSIS OF THE THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION OF A CHURCH SCHISM

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Introduction

“Is Christ divided?”—that is the critical question of the apostle Paul to the ekklesia of Corinth where schismata developed and groups were formed around Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and also Christ. “Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?” was the Apostle’s disturbed and exhortative question. As if he wanted to say: how on earth is that possible?! A Christ divided is a dead Christ; a church divided must be a dead church.

We should keep in mind that Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians was addressed to a local congregation/church (ekklesia) and that he was pleading for nothing less than ‘perfect unity’ in a local church.¹

¹ The NT concept ekklesia goes back to the OT kahal Jahveh, the people of God, and indicates the gathered congregation/believers; it is translated by the Romanic word ‘congregation’ (gemeente). The Germanic word ‘church’ (kerk) relates to the Greek kuriakos which means ‘those who belong to the Lord’ (see K.L. Schmidt, ekklesia, in G. Kittel & G. Friedrich (eds.), Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Abridged in one volume (trans. G.W. Bromiley) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 394–402; B. Wentsel, Dogmatiek 4b. De Heilige Geest, de Kerk en de Laatste Dingen (Dogmatics 4b. The Holy Spirit, The Church and the Last Things) (Kampen: Kok, 1998), 21–22; H. Küng, De Kerk (The Church) (Hilversum: Paul Brand, 1967), 95f; J.J.F. Durand, Una sancta catholica in sendingperspektief. ‘n Analise van die probleme rondom kerklike pluriformiteit en ekumenisiteit in die sending (Una sancta catholica in Missiological Perspective. An Analysis of the Problems of the Pluriformity and Ecumenicity of the Church in Missionary Work) (Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1961), 18–43. Ekklesia always refers to the ‘local church/congregation’ (Matt 18:17, Rom, 1 Cor) or the ‘universal church/congregation’ (Matt 16:18, Eph, Col). A ‘church’ does not consist of ‘congregations’ but of believers (W.J. Snyman, Nuwe en ou dinge. Uit die skat van die koninkryk (New and Old Things. From the Treasures of the Kingdom) (Potchefstroom: Pro Rege, 1977), 24–25, 35–50, 76–87). It is therefore confusing to refer to a church which consists of congregations; it is as meaningless as to say that a congregation consists of churches. K. Barth (Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/1 (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1960),
The modern problem that we face today, where local congregations and churches grouped together to form separate ‘denominations’ in opposition to other ‘denominations,’ was never in the mind of Paul and is an even more untenable situation than division in a local church.

Ever since I started to study theology, I have experienced division and disunity in the church of Christ as an immense problem because it so obviously contradicts the clear teaching of the New Testament message. I am convinced that nowhere else in the Reformational tradition is the principle of *sola Scriptura* ignored and neglected the way it is in the case of the unity of the church.

**Can Christ Be Divided?**

For the purpose of this article, I concentrate on the New Testament teaching on church unity, diversity, and disunity.\(^2\)

In the whole range of New Testament teaching there is no sign whatsoever of disunity in the sense of division or schism between the different *ekklesiai* (congregations/churches). The emphasis is on unity: unity in the local congregations and unity between the local congregations. In the early stages, there were many *ekklesiai* in different countries, each with its own character and problems: in Turkey (Colosse, Derbe, Ephesus, Galatia, Laodicea, Lystra, Pergamum, Philadelphia, Sardis, Smyrna, Thyatira); in the Middle East (Jerusalem, Judaea, Galilee, Samaria, Antioch); in Greece (Corinth, Philippi, Berea, Thessalonica); in Italy (Rome). It can well be imagined that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem followed a more disciplined liturgy than the charismatic and ecstatic Christians in Corinth. What bound all of them together was

\(^750\) correctly remarks that the New Testament *ekklesiai* does not refer to ‘different churches’ (as we do today), but to the local congregations divided by geography. The only exception might be Acts 9:31, but it should be kept in mind that the *ekklesia* of Jerusalem was at that time the only *ekklesia*. In 1 Cor and Rom the ‘body of Christ’ refers to a local congregation, in Eph and Col to the universal church (Küng, *De Kerk*, 265).